

# The Spiritual Imperative of Native Epistemology: Restoring Harmony and Balance to Education

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## Introduction

*Some time ago it was my privilege to have the responsibility to prepare the traditional protocol that is an initial step in some of the events in which Elders lead their people. In this case, I was in the company of the respected Elder, Art Raining Bird, from Rocky Boy, Montana. At that point the setting was very informal. I looked at him and the realization of who was sitting there made me realize how little I knew. He was sitting in the room where I was preparing the protocol, his white hair down to his shoulders. I thought of the tremendous respect in which he was held by his own people, the profound and detailed knowledge he had of our culture. His stature as spiritual leader in the community was more like that of an institution than a person. He knew what I was doing, but was not watching me intrusively. It was as though he were just noticing, but not noticing. I thought of how poorly I knew how to complete my task, and thought "What am I doing, trying to prepare the protocol? I don't know how to do this properly, and in the presence of a person who has seen this countless times and knows all its significance!"*

*I said to him in Cree "Grandfather, I don't know how to do these things. I am trying to prepare the protocol but I realize that basically I don't know anything. As a matter of fact, I have no idea what I'm doing. Please, I implore you, have compassion for what I am doing."*

*Elder Art Raining Bird, for all of his stature and knowledge, was a living example of humility. He looked at me and answered with a deep kindness and understanding, saying "It's nothing, my grandson. We don't know anything." (Walter Lightning, 1992, p. 1)*

With this passage in mind I begin this article on the spiritual imperative of Native epistemology. This exchange between Walter Lightning and Elder Art Raining Bird is more than a dialogue between two people: it serves as a glimpse into the world of the Native mind and soul. And it is that mind and soul that I hope to share with you on this journey toward restoring harmony and balance to education for all people, especially Aboriginal people.

I choose to use the term *Native*, for I am accustomed to its usage, but it could easily be interchanged, and from time to time I use it interchangeably with any one of the following: *Aboriginal, Indian, American Indian, Canadian Indian, Inuit, Native American, Amerindian, Status, non-Status, Treaty Indian, non-Treaty Indian, Metis, First Nations, and Indigenous*. These terms collectively refer to those people whose ancestors were the original in-

habitants of lands that are now subject to rule by other governments and peoples. *Native* is also used generically, without reference to politics, and is not meant to imply that all Native peoples are the same. On the contrary, Allen (1986) suggests, “the wide diversity of tribal systems on the North American continent notwithstanding—and they are as diverse as Paris and Peking” (p. 6).

So much of the literature about Native education is negative and focuses on what is wrong with Native people. And yet Native people are known to have a strong sense of identity with a profound connection to their lands, languages, and cultures. They claim the right to define what it means to be Native and seek recognition from all others on these very terms (Burger, 1990).

Stan Wilson (1995) of the University of Alberta has challenged us to shift our attention to what it was that kept our ancestors in harmony with their environment. We need to regain that perspective and make ourselves adjust to that regained perspective. Is this spiritual? Can we teach it? If we don’t teach these things and if we don’t acknowledge the work and the help of our ancestors in our writings and in our research, will we do any better than the white scholars who have forced us to hear only their side of the story for so long? (p. 69).

I have accepted Stan Wilson’s invitation to shift my inquiry of Native education to what helped our ancestors to live in harmony and balance with all that was around them. I examine the questions that he has posed regarding Native spirituality in the context of higher education: can we teach it, and if so, how? I intend to answer these questions so that educators and students will come to realize that there is a role and place for Native spirituality in higher education. It is my hope that educational institutions, tribal and mainstream, will choose to incorporate these practices into their programs, services, and teachings.

#### *Rationale for the Study*

In this article I examine the spiritual imperative of Native epistemology with the aim of developing a holistic model that integrates culture and education. My purpose is not to replace the present educational system, but to introduce another perspective on how we may better relate to each other as human beings, to our Mother Earth, and to the other creatures of this planet. Clearly the social and other ills that beset our cities and communities call for a new paradigm. This study is not meant to denigrate Western society, nor pass judgment on Western education, but to point out that even its ardent supporters denote a crisis. Purpel (1989) describes the crisis in education as a moral and spiritual crisis, preferring the word *crisis* to *problem* or *issue* or *concern*.

Purpel (1989) states:

We are, I believe, very much in a cultural, political, and moral crisis and hence, ipso facto, in an educational crisis. Indeed, it is imperative that we confront the nature of this crisis ... I very much share the view that we as a culture, nation, people, even as a species, confront

enormous and awesome threats to our most cherished notions of life, including life itself. The dangers of nuclear war, starvation, totalitarianism, and ecological disaster are as real as they are menacing, and not to view them as problems of immense magnitude and consequence is to contribute to their seriousness. (pp. 1-2)

My rationale for pursuing this particular line of research derives from my own experience at university. Although I appreciate the learning that I received, I was left with a feeling of emptiness, as if something was missing. In fact, my graduate experience was a nightmare. Nearly 20 years ago I started law school and became exposed to the Socratic method of learning, which is to question everything, doubt everyone, and trust no one. Purpel (1989) described the Socratic method as placing "great emphasis on clarity and on the thorough examination of propositions and statements on skepticism, and on logical analysis" (p. 78), and by "relentless, persistent, and brilliant displays of unsettling questions and probes that often led people to a state of intellectual bewilderment and devastation (and rage)." That is the state that I found myself in while attending law school, and I clearly felt alone and set adrift from the cultural moorings of my culture and community.

However, I persisted, graduated, and practiced law, but did not enjoy it. Even the practice of law left me feeling empty and unfulfilled. The emotional and psychological trauma of my law school experience took me 15 years to overcome. Healing was a slow process that began when I left my legal practice nearly 10 years ago and immersed myself in helping my community by being a counselor at a local community college serving a large population of Native Hawaiian students. The work was exhausting, the hours were long, the pay was low, but the rewards were tremendous. Lasting friendships were formed, dreams were realized, and the emptiness disappeared. I was no longer satisfied with just keeping people, my people, out of jail. Being involved with the community college helped me to help other Hawaiians to better themselves—and that was reward in itself.

#### *Research Question*

What is the spiritual nature of Native epistemology and how can it be incorporated into higher education so that individuals, institutions, and communities are benefited?

In considering this question I invite you to reflect on the words of Ross (1996), who stated:

There is a wide-spread Aboriginal understanding that thought or information must be shared in ways that leave it open to the listeners to take whatever meaning they wish to find in what they have heard. That is the premise of storytelling, where the storyteller will never say, "That's not what I meant." The Western preoccupation with such questions as "What did Shakespeare really mean in Hamlet?" is nothing more than our preoccupation; the pertinent question for most Aboriginal peoples seems to be something like "What did Hamlet cause you to think, feel or do?" (pp. ix-x)

So my question to you on reading this article is “What does spirituality mean to you?”

*In Search of the Sacred*

One might ask why share what is Native—especially when it concerns the spiritual? McGaa (1990) had this to say about this question:

A question that will be asked is why I am willing to teach non-Indians about Native American spirituality and about my own spiritual experiences. I believe, like Fools Crow, Eagle Feather, Sun Bear, Midnight Song, Rolling Thunder, and a host of other traditional peoples, that it is time that spirituality is shared.

Frank Fools Crow, Oglala holyman and ceremonial chief of the Teton Sioux, said in reference to the pipe and the sweat lodge, “These ceremonies do not belong to Indians alone. They can be done by all who have the right attitude ... and who are honest and sincere about their beliefs in Wakan Tanka (Great Spirit) and follow the rules.”

We do not have any choice. It is one world that we live in. If the Native Americans keep all their spirituality in their own community, the old wisdom that has performed so well will not be allowed to work its environmental medicine on the world where it is desperately needed....

A spiritual fire that promotes a communal commitment to a worldwide environmental undertaking is needed. Native or primal ways will fuel that fire and give it a great power. I call on all experienced Native American traditionalists to consider coming forward and sharing their knowledge. Come forth and teach how Mother Earth can be revered, respected, and protected. (Foreword)

The search for this spirituality implies that it is somewhere hidden or lost. Mander (1991), in his book *In the Absence of the Sacred*, said:

Perhaps the most painful realization for Americans is that in many of these foreign locales—particularly South America, the Pacific Islands, Indonesia, and the Philippines—the natives’ struggles to maintain their lands and sovereignty is often directed against United States corporations, or technology, or military. More to the point, it is directed against a mentality, and an approach to the planet and to the human place on Earth, that native people find fatally flawed. For all the centuries they’ve been in contact with us, they’ve been saying that our outlook is missing something. But we have ignored what they say. To have heeded them would have meant stopping what we were doing and seeking another path. It is this very difference in world views that has made the assault on Indian people inevitable. (p. 6)

This article has been a journey of self-discovery and self-revelation for me and has allowed me to focus on notions of spirituality and not “religion,” Native and not “western” aspects of spirituality, and traditional not “new age” teachings. These distinctions are important because they are at the heart of what is Native culture. And Native culture is what Native education is all about. George Erasmus, in an open letter to the Chiefs of Canada (Assembly of First Nations, 1988), stated:

The future of our people in Canada and the survival of our cultures, languages, and all that we value are directly linked to the education of our children. I believe that the wealth of information contained in these reports will enable us to construct an educational system that truly reflects the needs and desires of the First Nations. Furthermore, I believe that

these systems, once established, will help us to restore the health of our communities and empower us in our efforts to implement self-government.

This topic, though narrow in its focus, encompasses all that is Native, because the spiritual permeates all aspects of Native life. Thus in presenting this article I must share two impressions. First, I am acutely aware of the position that I find myself in, as Walter Lightning discovered, of how much I don't know about what I'm doing, and begging your compassion as I stumble on—for I don't know anything. Second, I am acutely aware that this topic of Native spirituality requires that I approach this task in a certain way: a Native way. Thus I am driven to write in a certain style, which Hampton (1995) described as "iterative rather than linear," which "progresses in a spiral that adds a little with each thematic repetition rather than building an Aristotelian argument step-by-step" (p. 6).

I begin with a discussion of epistemology, both Western and Native views, and those elements that I believe are at the core of Native knowledge: the Sacred Circle, Mother Earth, and Elders. For purposes of this article these elements are presented as they interrelate and interconnect with each other and are not presented in any hierarchical order. Finally, it is my hope that this article will in some small way assist Native people in their (our) survival as a community.

The goal of Indian people is perhaps somewhat different from the goals of a lot of other people. Their goals are not simply to survive, but to survive as a community; not just to survive as an individual, but to survive as a group. Similarly, the notion of progress in the Indian community is also different. The concept of progress is really not that appealing to Indian people because the purpose of the Indian community is not to progress. The purpose of the Indian community is simply to be, and the people find that being, along with those relationships between people and clans and certain ceremonial kinds of things, is a very satisfying existence. This may be difficult to understand for outsiders. People often assume that Indian tribes and people are going to disappear because they are unable to deal with poverty, and that being poor is somehow synonymous with being an Indian. It is difficult to understand how this notion began, because a tribe is certainly nothing less than a big self-help organization that is designed to help people and meet the psychological, spiritual, and economic needs of its members. (Wilkinson, 1980, pp. 453-454)

Indeed, some non-Native writers, such as Knudtson and Suzuki (1992), emphasize that global survival is inextricably connected to survival of Native peoples and that we are forewarned to take whatever measures are necessary to ensure that Native culture and people survive.

Native customs are evidence of an astute understanding of the psychology of human interactions. Yet aboriginal peoples around the world are in the final stages of an assault by conquerors who are intent on exploiting their land and resource base. Of course, the history of our species is one of conquest and takeovers of territories. But like the current spasm of species extinction, the destruction of indigenous people is now occurring with frightening speed. Once these people have disappeared, their body of priceless thought and knowledge, painstakingly acquired over thousands of years, will disappear forever. And like a species that has lost its habitat and survives only in zoos, indigenous people who have lost their land and eke out a living in tiny reserves or urban slums lose their uniqueness and identity. (p. xxvii)

### *Epistemology*

But in a world increasingly dominated by the growth imperative of global economics, the infatuation with technology, and the ever expanding demands of an exploding human population, we cling to assumptions founded on the inadequate Cartesian and Newtonian world view. Are there other perspectives from which to make our judgments and assessments, other ways of perceiving our place in the cosmos? (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992, p. xxiv)

Thus epistemology is the study of the nature and attainment of knowledge, and which much of the literature describes as holistic, encompassing the intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual realms (Barman, Hebert, & McCaskill, 1987). Calls for reforming our educational systems to better meet the needs of Native students always include Native culture and language. And the most distinguishing feature of Native culture and language is its spirituality. However, this is the one aspect of Native culture that is often missing, neglected, or dismissed in western educational models.

When spirituality is considered, too often it is confused with religion; and thus people miss the crucial point of its unique impact. Spirituality is the fundamental principle that Natives have been searching for in their university experience. It is the search from within that will help give Aboriginal and other students the harmony and balance that is needed to meet the demands and rigors of university study and lead them to discover their true selves. And it is this search for truth that leads us to consider Native education.

Native education has taken on many forms over the years, and some of these forms should long ago have been forgotten and replaced. Hampton (1993) explains that

the failure of non-Native education of Natives could be read as the success of Native resistance to cultural, spiritual, and psychological genocide. In any case, for whatever reason, whoever is to blame, Indian education defined as non-Indian education of Indians has had a long and conclusive history of failure. (p. 267)

Longboat (1987) goes further by describing:

The education provided to First Nations ... has been an important element in an overall policy of assimilation. It has been a means of replacing Native languages, religions, history and cultural traditions, values, and worldviews with those of the European settler nations and of modifying the values of the Indian nations through their children—those who are weakest and can offer least resistance. Education has worked as an agent of colonial subjugation with the longterm objective of weakening Indian nations by causing the children to lose sight of their identities, history, and spiritual knowledge. (p. 23)

It is this spiritual knowledge that is essential to all Native cultures that we hope to rediscover and restore to our contemporary educational systems to bring harmony and balance back into the lives of Native people—thus education for meaning. But first let us consider, What is epistemology

and how is it related to education? Husen and Postlethwaite (1994) describe that relationship as follows:

Epistemology is that branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and attainment of knowledge. Given that education is concerned with the transmission of knowledge, epistemology is central to educational inquiry and has influenced educational theory at least since Plato. (p. 1996)

The information and knowledge gathering of Western and Aboriginal approaches differ widely. Ermine (1995) describes the assumption that drives the Western search for knowledge as:

One assumption is that the universe can be understood and controlled through atomism. The intellectual tendency in Western science is the acquisition and synthesis of total human knowledge within a world-view that seeks to understand the outer space objectively. In the process, Western science, the flagship of the Western world, sought answers to the greatest questions concerning our existence and our place in the universe by keeping everything separate from ourselves. In viewing the world objectively, Western science has habitually fragmented and measured the external space in an attempt to understand it in all its complexity. Fragmentation of the universe has led to what Bohm (1980) calls a "fragmentary self-world view." (Battiste & Barman, 1995, p. 102)

Knudtson and Suzuki (1992) further expound on this fragmentation:

thus, while science yields powerful insights into isolated fragments of the world, the sum total of these insights is a disconnected, inadequate description of the whole. Ironically, scientists today are faced with the devastating possibility that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. (p. xxii)

My discussion of epistemology requires that I examine the traditional notions of Native world views, and this leads to a discussion of the whole. To discover the whole I must first contemplate the sacred circle.

### *The Sacred Circle*

In the old days, when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came from the sacred circle of the nation and as long as the circle remained whole, the people flourished. The blossoming tree was the living centre of the circle and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, from the west came rain, and the north, with its cold and powerful wind, gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the external world (the transcending world, the universe) and with it, our religion. Everything done by the power of the universe is made in the form of a circle. The sky is circular and I have heard that the Earth is round as a ball and the stars too are round. The wind whirls, at the height of its power. The birds build their nests in a circular way, for they have the same religion as us ... Our teepees (tents) were circular like the nests of the birds, and were always laid in a circle—the circle of the nation, a nest made of many nests, where the Great Spirit willed us to brood our children. (Sioui, 1992, p. 8)

The journey toward harmony and balance in Native education begins with the Sacred Circle. The Circle of Life thus speaks of the interconnectedness and interrelationships of all life. All are looked on as being equal and interdependent, part of the great whole, and this view permeates the entire Native vision of life and the universe. It is a power far greater than

man. Brown (1953), in his work involving the Sioux, illustrated this relationship as:

The sacredness of relationships is one of the most important aspects of Siouan culture; for since the whole of creation is essentially One, all parts within the whole are related. Thus the Sioux refer to each other not by their particular names, but by a term expressing their relationship, which is determined by age levels rather than by blood ties. A young man thus always addresses an older man or woman as "Ate" (Father), or "Ina" (Mother), or if they are much older by "Tunkashila" (Grandfather) or "Unchi" (Grandmother); and in turn the older address the younger as "Son" or "Daughter," "Grandson" or "Granddaughter."

For the Sioux, all relationships on earth are symbolic of the true and great relationship which always exists between man and the Great Spirit, or between man and Earth understood in its principle. In using these terms, the Sioux thus really invoke or recall the principle, and the individual—or really any particular thing—is for them only a dim reflection of this principle. (p. 15).

This concept is sometimes referred to as the Web of Life or All My Relations, which Sioui (1992) explains as:

Every expression of life, material and immaterial, demands of the Amerindian respect and the spontaneous recognition of an order that, while incomprehensible to the human mind, is infinitely perfect. This order is called the Great Mystery. To the traditional Amerindian, life finds its meaning in the implicit and admiring recognition of the existence, role, and power of all the forms of life that compose the circle. Amerindians, by nature, strive to respect the sacred character of the relations that exist among all forms of life.

Where their human kin are concerned, the Amerindians' attitude is the same: all human beings are sacred because they are an expression of the will of the Great Mystery. Thus we all possess within ourselves a sacred vision, that is, a unique power that we must discover in the course of our lives in order to actualize the Great Spirit's vision, of which we are an expression. Each man and woman, therefore, finds his or her personal meaning through that unique relationship with the Great Power of the universe. (p. 9)

The discussion of the Sacred Circle brings everything into its reaches and understanding. It is a discussion of the whole or wholeness. Allen (1986) describes this wholeness as

In American Indian thought, God is known as the All Spirit, and other beings are also spirit—more spirit than body, more spirit than intellect, more spirit than mind. The natural state of existence is wholeness. Thus healing chants and ceremonies emphasize restoration of wholeness, for disease is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole. Beauty is wholeness. Health is wholeness. Goodness is wholeness. (p. 60)

Related to this, and of equal importance, is the concept of Mother Earth, and the wholeness of her being is of utmost concern to Native people, past and present.

### *Mother Earth*

The beauty of the trees,  
The softness of the air,  
The fragrance of the grass,  
Speaks to me.



The summit of the mountain,  
The thunder of the sky,  
The rhythm of the sea,  
Speaks to me.

The faintness of the stars,  
The freshness of the morning,  
The dew drop on the flower,  
Speaks to me.

The strength of fire,  
The taste of salmon,  
The trail of the sun,  
And the life that never goes away,  
They speak to me.

And my heart soars.  
(Chief Dan George, 1974, p. 83)

Mother Earth is a being of supreme importance to the Native mind and spirit. This is poignantly expressed by McGaa (1990):

We, the American Indian, had a way of living that enabled us to live within the great, complete beauty that only the natural environment can provide. The Indian tribes had a common value system and a commonality of religion, without religious animosity, that preserved that great beauty that the two-leggeds [humans] definitely need. Our four commandments from the Great Spirit are: (1) respect for Mother Earth, (2) respect for the Great Spirit, (3) respect for our fellow man and woman, and (4) respect for individual freedom (provided that individual freedom does not threaten the tribe or the people or Mother Earth. (p. 204)

The concern for Mother Earth in Native spirituality is also evident in two other concepts referred to as *matriarchy* and *place*. From a Native perspective, the demise of Native cultures and lifestyles has been directly attributed to Western patriarchal fear of gynocracy (Allen, 1986). Indeed, the patriarchal order, according to Sioui (1992),

no matter how refined and intellectualized, is nothing but an apology for racism, sexism, and what we term "androcentrism," defined as an erroneous conception of nature that places man at the centre of creation and denies non-human (and indeed, non-masculine) beings their particular spirituality and their equality in relation to life's balance. (p. 16)

Allen (1986) discussed matriarchy as:

The sacred, ritual ways of the American Indian peoples are similar in many respects to other sacred cultures on the planet ... That is, we share in a worldwide culture that predates western systems derived from the "civilization" model, and, as such, Indians are only some of the tribespeople compelled to suffer the outrages of patriarchal industrial conquest and genocide....

Tribal world-views are more similar to one another than any of them are to the patriarchal world-view, and they have a better record of survival. (pp. 5-6)

And Sioui (1992) further expounded on the status of matriarchy in this manner:

The “high status” of Amerindian women is not, as some authors have declared, “the result of their control over the tribe’s economic organization.” The matricentric thought in these societies springs from the Amerindian’s acute awareness of the genius proper to woman, which is to instill into man, whom she educates, the social and human virtues he must know to help maintain the relations that are the essence of existence and life. Women do not control anything through some “force” they possess, as Judith K. Brown would have it; they act through the natural intuition which Creation communicates to those who are open to its laws. Man, as Bachofen observes, does not possess this genius for educating: “It is by caring for her child that woman, more than man, learns how to exceed the narrow limits of selfishness, to extend her solicitude to other beings, to strive to preserve and embellish the existence of others.” (pp. 17-18)

The Native notion of place or sense of place refers to appreciation and recognition of certain lands, locations, natural monuments, and places as sacred and imbued with special power and spirit. Man is thus required to maintain these places with honor and respect to ensure that the spiritual essence and power continues to benefit each succeeding generation of people, whether Native or not. Deloria (Colorado, 1988) described power and place as:

Here, power and place are dominant concepts - power being the living energy that inhabits and/or composes the universe, and place being the relationship of things to each other ... put into a simple equation: power and place produce personality. This equation simply means that the universe is alive, but it also contains within it the very important suggestions that the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner ... The personal nature of the universe demands that each and every entity in it seek and sustain personal relationships. Here, the Indian theory of relativity is much more comprehensive than the corresponding theory articulated by Einstein and his fellow scientists. The broader Indian idea of relationship, in a universe very personal and particular, suggests that all relationships have a moral content. For that reason, Indian knowledge of the universe was never separated from other sacred knowledge about ultimate spiritual realities. The spiritual aspect of knowledge about the world taught the people that relationships must not be left incomplete. There are many stories about how the world came to be, and the common themes running through them are the completion of relationships and the determination of how this world should function.

Thus for Natives, sense of place anchors their being and identity in who they are and their relationship to Mother Earth, and the places that have special meaning for tribal groups and members. Knudtson and Suzuki (1992) relate the following two accounts:

Stanford University ecologist, Paul Erhlich, and Harvard biologist, E.O. Wilson, are “suggesting that science alone is not enough to solve the planetary environmental crisis and that we must re-create for ourselves a sense of place within the biosphere that is steeped in humility and reverence for all other life.” (p. xxiv)

A young Lytton Indian described the Stein Valley as his “cathedral,” a spiritual place where he could go and feel the pressures of modern life fall away as he regained a sense of peace and oneness with Nature and a reconnection with the past. These are not romantic ideas of an extinct past that have no relevance to modern urban dwellers. They endure and hold the key to our sanity and survival. (p. xxvii)

To ignore these views of Mother Earth, matriarchal order of the world, and sense of place denies knowledge that is at least thousands of years old.

These notions persist in Native communities and hearts, and therein are found the seeds of transforming ourselves for the better. We can all benefit by reclaiming this knowledge base and restoring it and making it a part of our educational system for all who share this planet.

Our survival is dependent on the realization that Mother Earth is a truly holy being, that all things in this world are holy and must not be violated, and that we must share and be generous with one another. You may call this thought by whatever fancy words you wish—psychology, theology, sociology, or philosophy—but you must think of Mother Earth as a living being. Think of your fellow men and women as holy people who were put here by the Great Spirit. Think of being related to all things! With this philosophy in mind as we go on with our environmental ecology efforts, our search for spirituality, and our quest for peace, we will be far more successful when we truly understand the Indians' respect for Mother Earth. (McGaa, 1990, pp. 208-209)

Of all the teachings we receive  
this one is the most important:

Nothing belongs to you  
Of what there is,

Of what you take,  
You must share.

(Chief Dan George, 1974, p. 25)

### *Elders*

Where is the source of this Native knowledge and teachings? Without question it is the Elders: keepers of the wisdom, the libraries of Native communities, repositories of knowledge from time immemorial, a sort of Native World Wide Web. There are three areas that I believe Elders are especially attuned to, and these are Stories, Ceremonies, and Values. The Elders bring this knowledge and teachings home to the community, and more especially to the children. Garrett (1996) characterized Elders as follows:

In the traditional way, Native American elders are honored as highly respected persons because of the lifetime's worth of wisdom they have acquired through continuous experience. Elders bear an important responsibility for the tribal community by functioning as parent, teacher, community leaders, and spiritual guide.

In the traditional way, elders have the responsibility of directing children's attention to the things with which they coexist (e.g., trees, plants, rocks, animals, elements, the land) and to the meaning of these things. In this way, Native American children develop a heightened level of sensitivity for all of the relationships of which they are a part and which are a part of them, for the circular (cyclical) motion of life, and for the customs and traditions of their people. (pp. 16-17)

Whereas youth and vigor are admired in western culture, age and wisdom are held in high esteem in Native culture. Elders are to be distinguished from the elderly, although both are venerated because of their long years on Mother Earth. Elders, however, assume another dimension in Native communities, because of their

accumulated reservoirs of personal experience, knowledge, and wisdom—or compassionate insight and a sense of the enduring qualities and relationships around them. They freely offer this wisdom to living generations of their people in an effort to help them connect harmoniously with their past, present, and future. (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992, p. 179)

Kirkness (1992) calls on us to

Give voice to our ancestors, by learning from our Elders as they pass on to us the teachings of their ancestors. They are the keepers and teachers of our cultures. It is our responsibility in this generation to ensure that the ties between the Elders and the youth are firmly entrenched so that the youth of today can continue the process of mending the Sacred Hoop for the benefit of future generations. (p. 146)

How might we give voice to our ancestors? Kirkness shares:

We are telling the stories of our ancestors: we are telling the stories through drama, through ballet, through songs, through dance, and through storytelling. We are returning to our ceremonies to mark births, deaths, name-givings, marriages. This is the voice of our ancestors. We are having potlatches and feasts to honor our people. That is giving voice to our ancestors. And we are even building longhouses, and that is giving voice to our ancestors. Yes, we are attempting to accept the challenge to return to our culture in this generation though the path is rough and rocky. (pp. 146-147)

Elders bless us in so many ways, such as in their stories and ceremonies. It is through their teachings that traditional ceremonies have yet survived. One such ceremony is the Vision Quest, which the Ojibwa ethnologist Basil H. Johnston has written about in Sioui (1992):

Creation is, in the concrete, the fulfillment of the vision of Kitche Manitou (the Great Power) ... Every being, whether plant, animal or rock [is] composite (material and immaterial) in nature ... only men and women are endowed by Kitche Manitou with a capacity for vision; only man is enjoined to seek vision and to live it out ... Vision conferred a powerful sense of understanding of self and of destiny; it also produced a unique and singular sense of worth and personal freedom. Vision, when it did come, was the result of one's personal effort and maturation of the soul-spirit. As it was personal in terms of effort and as it represented a gift from the Creator, no one else was privy to it. There was to be in neither quest nor vision, interference ... The vision, when it did come, marked the culmination of the preparation and quest and the beginning of a new order of life ... No longer were the acts of a man or woman isolated deeds devoid of meaning or quality in the moral order. To life, there was purpose; to conduct, a significance in the fulfillment of the vision. No longer was true or applicable the dictum, "no man begins to be until he has received his vision." With the advent of vision, existence became living ... The Path of Life prescribed by vision was tortuous. Nevertheless, it was the mode by which men who received vision attained integrity, dignity, peace, fidelity and wisdom. (p. 10)

Another aspect of Elders' teachings is in the transmission of the cultural values that bind Native communities together. Some of these values are mentioned above as they relate to the Sacred Circle, Mother Earth, and Elders. But there are so many more, and their importance cannot be overemphasized. Sioui (1992) defines them as "the portrait of a culture depicts the ideas that are most important to its people. The hierarchy of priorities is called a scale of values; culture, therefore, is fundamentally a question of values" (p. 20).

The Assembly of First Nations (1988) has also declared the importance and place of Native values in its national report *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future*:

First Nations education focuses on the wellbeing of the students. It is a holistic approach that prepares First Nations students for total living. Modern First Nations education is consistent with traditional First Nations education. Both incorporate a deep respect for the natural world with the physical, moral, spiritual, intellectual, and life skills development of the individual. First Nations language and cultural values are taught and enhanced through education. First Nations education develops qualities and values in students such as respect for Elders and cultural tradition, modesty, leadership, generosity, resourcefulness, integrity, wisdom, courage, compassion for others, and living harmoniously with the environment. (p. 6)

### Conclusion

This article has been a journey into the spiritual nature of Native knowledge. I have seen how prevalent the spiritual is in Native cultures. To summarize: the Sacred Circle speaks to man's relationship to the great universe; Mother Earth speaks to man's connection to tribal territory and the earth; and Elders connect people to their past, their community, and their tribe. If education is truly to be transformed for Native people, then the challenge for our institutions, and for educators, is to find ways for these practices and beliefs to become a normal part of the educational experience. The quest now becomes one of finding how faculties and institutions can incorporate the wisdom and spirituality of our communities and Elders to increase and enhance the harmony and balance that is so essential to fulfillment of their educational missions.

### *I've Tried to be an Indian*

Let no one deny me the right to say that I've tried to be an Indian.  
 In the White Man's world I found it difficult, but I've tried.  
 I've tried to care for my people and showed my concern as Chief Dan George,  
 not how others wished me to show it.  
 Can the deer climb the tree like a raccoon?  
 There will always be someone who confuses the deer with the raccoon,  
 but such a person has slow eyes and a quick tongue.  
 And if someone says I have not been Indian enough he will never know  
 how much I've tried.  
 (Chief Dan George, 1982, p.22)

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